

{ Only Connect: Interdisciplinary Studies }

In an age of information, connection, and communication, in most 21st-century schools there endures an almost unquestioned tendency toward fragmentation and subdivision.

In the previous century, in the name of efficiency, educators have embraced specialization – the impulse to departmentalize studies for the sake of supposedly more advanced learning from specialized educators. The place of the generalist in the classroom is now largely in elementary school. After elementary school, that contradictory impulse to pull materials together, to synthesize, to make something whole from all the pieces – is rarely revisited, if at all. But the need to seek connection and see the world as a whole – not as unconnected fragments – is perhaps among our most human impulses. No person – and no classroom – is an island unto itself.

This fragmentation of the learning community is exacerbated – especially in the secondary school – by high-stakes standardized testing and increasing subject specialization. No feature of the current high school curriculum better exemplifies this bias toward homogeneous overspecialization than Advanced Placement courses. It's no mistake that some highly competitive independent schools are abandoning AP curricula in favor of more homegrown and self-assured advanced courses. While AP courses are still largely perceived as useful for providing nationally recognized assessment of specific skills and content for the college-bound, too much focus on an AP program of study will distort an independent school's larger humanist vision of educating the whole student, not just academically, but in terms of athletics, the arts, service, and spirituality.

A favorite film of mine is *Castaway* – in part, because it reminds me so much of teaching. Despite the presence of scores of students in the classroom throughout each day, the classroom teacher often

works in isolation from other teachers. Marooned in the classroom with my pupils and my subject matter, I know a sense of professional isolation can creep in. While I haven't been as desperate as Tom Hanks when he started talking to that volleyball, I've often felt that having colleagues step into my classroom for more than just a look around would certainly be a good reason for dancing around the fire.

One would do well to remember that Hanks's character, an information-age specialist, had to reinvent himself as the ultimate generalist in order to survive.

Film analogies aside, the truth is that when we teach, even in the midst of students, we usually teach alone. Oddly, some of the last things that teachers will share with each other are lesson plans, handouts and worksheets, ideas about pedagogy and instruction, and the latest developments in educational materials and technology. It's almost as if, once a teacher goes into the classroom and



closes the door, what happens inside with the students is confidential – even mysterious and unknown. My interest in teaching interdisciplinary courses arose, after 10 years in schools, from my need to cast away those institutional habits of seclusion, and, frankly, a self-serving idleness in how I thought I



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understood teaching. You can teach for 40 years, as a colleague of mine once said, or you can teach the same year 40 times. Interdisciplinary education creates a learning environment in which the tensions born out of differences of opinion and of subject actually help create a collaborative lesson, unit, or even course. Finding the common ground creates something new in the school curriculum. We've made fire by rubbing two sticks together. After all, it was the liberal arts, the integrated

studia humanitatis, that helped move Europe out of the dark ages.

In 2007-2008, the Interdisciplinary Initiative Program was proposed and accepted, providing a focus for two sets of courses – one set being American Literature, US History,

and Religion in America, and the other Environmental Science and The Universe Story. With the approval of American Studies as the first fully integrated course, Aldo Regalado and I began teaching the course with a dozen students in 2008-2009. The following year, this past one, we had almost a third of the junior class enrolled.

What does the American Studies classroom look like? Rather than desks, students sit at the Harkness table. Rather than study textbooks, we read critically a variety of primary sources – literature,

historical and political documents, paintings and political cartoons, motion pictures, and sound recordings. Students journal on their reading – an initial process of reflection that helps in Harkness discussions and in more elaborate writing assignments. The basic intellectual framework of the cultural

history of the United States is provided by teacher lectures that make generous use of PowerPoints multimedia features. American Studies, which occupies a double period of 90 minutes each day, offers a great deal of flexibility in terms of how we can structure our lessons. Rather than losing content through the blending of History and English, we can cover more material, and in more depth.

Interdisciplinary courses are about connections, seeing the bigger pictures rather than the smaller ones. When details are learned in the context of a common framework, they have a much greater likelihood of being understood and retained. Dr. Regalado and I knew we were on the right track when, several days after we finished a unit on the American Revolution, we heard one of our students humming "The Liberty Song" to himself in the hallway: Come, join hand in hand, brave Americans all, And rouse your bold hearts at fair Liberty's call; No tyrannous acts shall suppress your just claim, Or stain with dishonor America's name.

In the arts and humanities, of course, the connections are more naturally made between literature and languages, history, religious studies and philosophy, as well as music and visual arts. What Dr. Regalado and I have learned is that interdisciplinary work is not so much about learning different subject matter, but learning how people from different disciplines think. How does a historian think differently from a literary critic? How does a linguist think differently from a musician? In learning how others think, students are better able to think for themselves. The real challenges await for those of us in the humanities who would seek to make connections to math, statistics, and the sciences. In finding those connections through interdisciplinary study, we do not lose a sense of departmental identity, but gain a clearer sense of what is distinctive about how we, as individuals, have learned to think about the world.

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